

George Brooks

July 12, 1908 — January 27, 2000

George Brooks was a member of the faculty of the School of Industrial and Labor Relations for almost forty years. After earning a B.A. degree from Yale University in 1930 and an M.A. degree in Economics from Brown University in 1932, George began his career with Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal administration. He worked with the National Mediation Board, the National Labor Relations Board and, during World War II, with the War Production Board. He left government service in 1945 to become Director of Research and Education for the International Brotherhood of Pulp, Sulphite, and Paper Mill Workers, a position he held until joining the ILR School faculty in 1961.

Former ILR School Dean, Robert Doherty, who joined the faculty at the same time, remembered:

George was a fine teacher, sometimes profane but always well organized, knowledgeable and considerate of views other than his own. He was also one of the few on the faculty who could give an insider's view on how unions were structured, on the sometimes strained relationship between local and national organizations, on collective bargaining strategy and internal union politics.

David Lipsky, another former ILR School Dean (George outlasted five Deans), recalled:

George Brooks was a wonderful raconteur and one of the legendary figures in the history of the ILR School. His views were often controversial and considered unorthodox by many of his colleagues, but his students appreciated his stance as an occasional maverick—they loved his lack of orthodoxy. His courses were enormously popular with them and well remembered by alumni.

Among other courses, George developed and taught a course in Labor Union Administration as well as courses in Collective Bargaining and Labor History. He also taught in the School's Extension Division. He was dedicated to teaching and, despite consistently enthusiastic student responses, never stopped working to improve his courses. Over the years, many of his former students maintained close personal relationships with him. He warmly welcomed these continuing contacts because, as he told one former student, "a good deal of the teaching one does seems like dropping pebbles into bottomless holes. One does not even hear the splash."

Professor Brooks enjoyed telling how during the days of active student dissent on campus, he rejected the popular view that class attendance should be left to the students' discretion. As he related the story, rather than assume that "the brilliance of my lectures would guarantee attendance," he took the "totally unpopular view" that attendance would be required. He would recall with delight how this was met with "screams of rage and pain from most of

the students.” He would also emphasize, however, that some students were pleased that he cared whether they attended or not. No one cared more about his students than Professor Brooks.

George was also committed to using the School’s Extension Division’s programs around the state in a way that would make field work experience available to the School’s undergraduate and graduate students. He believed the resources of Extension should be used much more extensively than they were for the benefits of students in the degree program. He called it bringing the students to the outside world and the outside world to the students. George, who worked in close collaboration with ILR Extension Associate Sarah Gamm, developed courses, unique at the time, that integrated teaching, research, and field work at workplaces, bargaining tables, and inside labor, employer and government organizations. He wanted students to be involved in original research rather than learning only from secondary sources.

Much of his work in Extension emphasized training the trainers, that is preparing union members (and supervisors as well) to train their fellows in handling shop floor problems. This was a reflection of George’s skepticism about too heavy a reliance upon outside experts in collective bargaining, arbitrators included.

Union democracy was the dominant theme in George’s research and teaching. Throughout his career, he was an outspoken advocate for union democracy and a champion of the voice of the rank and file in union affairs. Forty years ago, he wrote prophetically that it was the local union and local leadership that provided the true source of vitality in the United States’ labor movement. He believed that unions would thrive as long as union leaders were sensitive to the membership’s desires. He was convinced that employee freedom of choice was essential to union democracy and, as he once wrote, “freedom of choice requires that union leaders not be relieved of the ordinary pressures, which are brought to bear in a democratic organization.”

George deplored what he considered the systematic withdrawal of the right of employee and membership free choice caused, among other things, by the centralization of authority in upper levels of union government, compulsory unionism, and an arrangement between unions and employers in which management obtained “mature,” “stable” and “predictable” industrial relations at the workplace in return for an “accommodating” relationship with their unions. George’s experience in government and the labor movement taught him that the presence of worker free choice is the foundation upon which true stability in industrial relations can be built.

Professor Brooks’ research was widely published in distinguished journals such as the *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, the *Cornell Law Review*, the *Review of Law and Social Change*, and the *Monthly Labor Review*.

Exemplary as George's academic achievements were, those who knew him best will remember him for his wit, his charm, his friendliness, his generosity, and his citizenship. Professor Gross will never forget delightful weekly brown bag lunches with George and Professor Vernon Jensen and a strong, kind and gentle man who spent hours on his tractor driving Professor Gross' young children around "Mr. Brooks' woods."

Two sons, Edward M. Brooks, of Washington, D.C., and David J. Brooks, of Vienna, Virginia; one daughter, Phoebe Dexter, of Hillsdale, Michigan; eight grandchildren; and seven great grandchildren survive Professor Brooks.

Robert Doherty, Ronald Donovan, James Gross